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ABSTRACT

School staff at the O'Connor Cooperative School in Australia had been concerned for some time about the difficulties faced by parents trying to fit traditional short preschool hours into their varying lifestyles. Their solution was to provide child care at the conclusion of the normal preschool session and on the two days per week that preschool was not in session. This case study describes the implementation of the long day care program for preschoolers. After providing background on the school's purpose, methods, and curriculum, the report gives detailed information on the initial stages of the program's implementation, such as acquiring governmental approval and additional classroom space, hiring additional staff, scheduling, enrollment, financing and book keeping, the accreditation process, and the program's curriculum components. The report concludes with a description of the program's success, evidenced by its lengthy waiting list. (EV)

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EDUCARE: THE WAY FORWARD.
A CASE STUDY.

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ABSTRACT SUMMARY.

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The O'Connor Cooperative School is the ACT Government's only Early Childhood school enrolling children into Pre school [sessional], Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 2. That is, children from four to eight years of age. The blending of these Early Childhood age groups is ideal, particularly from a developmental point of view. As experienced early childhood educators will appreciate, the period of early childhood in human development is one of rapid growth and development. Arrival at school or the day care centre means not only separation from loved ones but a need to learn about sharing and cooperation as well. The loving support of family, friends, teachers and carers at this time is essential and this can be easily achieved in a school community where children are all at a similar level of development.

The school staff had been concerned for some time about the difficulties faced by parents in trying to fit the traditional short pre school hours into the varying lifestyles of today's families. We were aware that the sessional pre school created a great deal of inconvenience for working parents and those who were undertaking studies.

The integration of Long Day Care into our school has been a natural progression for the children, staff and parents and has been highly successful. This paper outlines the processes that the school has gone through to establish this innovative program and highlights the advantages associated with offering dual services for Early Childhood students on the one site.

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BACKGROUND

The O'Connor Cooperative School is the ACT Government's only Early Childhood school. We enrol children into Pre school, Kindergarten, Year 1 and Year 2. That is, children from four to eight years of age. Currently, in the ACT, pre school children [that is, children who have turned four years of age before April 30 in the year that they are to commence pre school] are offered 10.5 hours of pre schooling per week. This pre schooling is usually sessional. The ACT Government provides the pre school building and the teacher, all other costs are met by the pre school community.

The O'Connor Cooperative School offers a different model, in that the pre school is fully integrated into the small government infant school. The pre school section is funded as outlined above, and not in the same way as the remainder of the school. Our pre school sessions are held on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday from 9 to 12.30.

The blending of these Early Childhood age groups is ideal, particularly from a developmental point of view. As experienced early childhood educators will appreciate, the period of early childhood in human development is one of rapid growth and development. During this time in their lives the child is most vulnerable and not at all independent. The older children may make independent gestures from time to time, often with less than satisfactory outcomes! Consider the major physical attainments during early childhood - birth, sitting up, controlling eye movements, crawling and walking. There and many other gross and fine motor skill milestones that are achieved during this time. In addition, there are considerable advances in the young child's emotional, social and cognitive development taking place in the early childhood years.

Early childhood (and similarly adolescence) is a period of emotional instability, with children having to learn to separate from parents and other loved family members. Arrival at school or the day care centre means not only separation from loved ones but a need to learn about sharing and cooperation as well. In addition, the young child tires easily and quickly and this factor can affect their performance. The loving support of family, friends, teachers and carers at this time is essential and this can be easily achieved in a school community where children are all at a similar level of development. The Early Childhood school is a focal point for young families in the neighbourhood. Young children feel comfortable and respond well within a smaller and less formal environment which can more closely match that of home.

Well trained and experienced Early Childhood staff have a more complete understanding of the normal and natural development of young children and can provide parents with the reassurance and support that they need. As we know, young children progress through predictable stages of development but their individual maturation rates can vary considerably. Within an environment specifically structured for the early childhood age range, the later developing children can progress at their individual rates with their self esteem still intact. My experience has shown that these children 'catch up' with their peers before they leave the early childhood school.

The school which is our case study today offers what we believe to be a developmentally appropriate program for this blended age group of children. Our literacy and numeracy outcomes are excellent without the need for expensive remedial programs. While we are class grouped for part of the day our children are multi age grouped, from pre school to year 2, for some curriculum areas. These areas include Science, Technology and Design, Chess, Problem Solving, Aussie Sports and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Craft. Many curriculum strands are integrated. For example: Movement to Music with the French language; the daily Perceptual Motor Program with the Language of Mathematics ; the Arts are fully integrated with all curriculum areas; the Environmental Education program is also integrated across most curriculum areas. Our Environmental Education program was one of six Australian schools profiled and featured in the Deakin University Environmental Education Study Guide, 1995.

Teaching and learning strategies include all those that are frequently used in good early childhood programs - exploration, discovery, concrete materials, small cooperative style group work, lots of conversation and as already mentioned, integrated curricula. The blended age range permits a variation in groupings - family, age and multi age are just some examples of the possibilities.

Where does the Educare come in? Well, the school staff had been concerned for some time about the difficulties faced by parents in trying to fit the traditional short pre school hours into the varying lifestyles of today's families. Many had to collect their pre schooler in the middle of the day and had to return to the school again at 3pm to collect older siblings. We were aware that the sessional pre school created a great deal of inconvenience for working parents and those who were undertaking studies. We discussed the options available to us and the most obvious solution was to provide child care at the conclusion of the pre school session and again on the two days when the pre school was not in session.

The school has limited classroom space and because of this the staff were reluctant to suggest any programs that required the use of additional classroom space. Nevertheless we discussed the proposal with the School Board. They were enthusiastic and keen to assist with getting the initiative off the ground. In 1994 the School Board prepared a commercial sponsorship package that was distributed to some Canberra builders and building suppliers. The outcome was that a young

Canberra builder,newly graduated from the University of Canberra with a degree in Construction Management and Economics and about to commence a career in the building industry, Richard Milin, agreed to build, at no cost, an additional classroom space for the school. The school paid for some materials with some being donated through the generosity of local businesses. With this expansion project underway the School Board felt that they could now act on the staff initiative and investigate the possibility of offering child care for the pre school children.

Initially the Board advised the Department of Education and Training's Chief Executive Cheryl Vardon, of its intentions and received encouragement and support in reply. We met with the ACT Director of Child Care, Elizabeth Worthington, over a long lunch, and discussed the school's options. She was very positive about the proposal and suggested that we should apply for a Long Day Care License. The school already offered Before School, After School and Vacation Care and it was thought that the Long Day Care License could incorporate all of the Outside School Hours activities.

At the commencement of 1995 the school P&C [the school's incorporated body] applied successfully for the Long Day Care License. This would enable us to provide Day Care for the pre school students when they are not attending a pre school session. As a result Long Day Care is now provided, in the Pre School room, on Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm, excluding the pre school sessions. The Long Day Care integrates with the After School, Before School Care and School Vacation program.

STAFFING

We were aware that it was important to select the right person to be the carer of our pre school students outside the pre school hours. Because we were determined that the Day Care would be a part of our total school programs it was important that we selected a person who would interact well with the school staff. Therefore the staff needed to be involved in the selection process. After staff and parent discussions took place we elected to advertise for an Early Childhood Associate [Child Care Worker Level 4] to fill this role.

At this stage of the preliminaries it was already December 1994 and the school year was about to draw to a close. In order to hasten the selection of the right person I spoke to the two graduating classes in the Bachelor of Applied Science [Child Care] Course at the Canberra Institute of Technology. I outlined the proposed program and invited interested persons to apply. Approximately a dozen applications were received within the week. The quality of the applicants was excellent. An interview panel comprising one parent, the pre school teacher and myself was established to interview the short listed applicants. Our Early Childhood Associate was appointed before Christmas 1994.

The staff had decided from the very start of the year that it was important for our

Early Childhood Associate to attend our weekly staff meeting. It had always been our aim to try to ensure that the flow from school to the Outside School Hours program was a seamless one and it seems that this is so. We employ our Early Childhood Associate from 12.30pm to 4.30pm on the days when the Pre school is in session. She collects them at the conclusion of the session and prepares them for lunch. The children may eat lunch with an older sibling if they want to but because of their newness to the school environment we felt that it was important for the group to eat together in a smaller group so the older sibling usually joins the Day Care group instead of the other way round. This has worked well. Just recently I have noticed some of the Day Care group choosing to leave their small group and eat with the larger group of older children. This seems to indicate a growing confidence in their school surroundings.

At 3pm two additional Child care Workers join the staff. One, with an Associate Diploma and the other,a sixteen year old senior school student. The student job shares with another student of the same age. At peak hour, when we are having afternoon tea and in the earlier part of the afternoon when the numbers of children are greater, we have extra staff on duty. The older children in the school, the eight year olds, take it in turns to set the table for afternoon tea. This is a duty that they love to do. They set the tables, pour the drinks and put out the fruit and plain biscuits. This leaves only the main part of afternoon tea to be prepared by the staff. On Thursday and Friday, when there are no Pre School sessions, our Early Childhood Associate works from 8am to 4pm. The hours of the other staff remain the same. The two senior staff members share the Before School Care, one doing a split shift on Tuesday and Wednesday. We also use Teacher Education students from the University of Canberra as relief Outside School Hours staff. They are usually students who have completed a teaching practicum in our school and are familiar with the children, staff and routines.

ENROLMENT

The parent community has been very enthusiastic about the Long Day Care program. We had expected between 6 and 10 children (there were 20 pre schoolers enrolled for 1995) to use the Day Care, either on a casual or permanent basis. As the year has progressed this number has grown to as many as 17 children from the group remaining for Child Care at the conclusion of the Pre School session at 12.30. Pre School sessions are not held on Thursday or Friday but the Child Care is available in the Pre School room from 8am to 5.45pm on these days. Thursday is usually very busy but Fridays are a little quieter.

FINANCE

We were determined to make the provision of Child Care as easy as possible for our busy parents. As a result we elected to not require the parents to book a place for their child in advance but advised them that a place would always be available if they required it. In addition they would not have to pay in advance or pay for days that

they didn't use. This approach was initially a tentative one but it has proven most successful. We began by charging parents $3.50 per hour but this has now been reduced to $3 per hour.

Initially I spent some time with representatives of the Federal Department of Human Services and Health who explained the Funding arrangements and didn't seem to mind too much when I repeatedly asked for clarification! While I had been a Director of a Community based Child Care Centre in the mid seventies I had forgotten about the bookwork. It soon came back to me!

Initially it was decided that the School Bursar, who was part time, would take on doing the Outside School Hours books, as a paid Bookkeeper. We were not prepared for what was to develop. After some months, with both of us working on the task, we realised what had happened. We had, without realising it, commenced a small business! After consultation with the parents it was agreed to appoint someone with the necessary experience. I phoned a number of Child Care Centres to see if they could recommend anyone but without success. Eventually we employed an Accountancy student from the University of Canberra who had some small business experience. Also, on her advice, we purchased a computer package. The bookwork continues to be cumbersome but we are managing and the monthly bank statement looks healthy.

ACCREDITATION

We had already been through the ACT School Review process so we believed that we knew what to expect. The staff decided to make the duties associated with the Accreditation process as routine as possible and the responsibility of the whole school staff and parents. We agreed to allocate a small portion of our weekly school staff meeting time to Accreditation business and we have found that this approach works well. Our Early Childhood Associate reports back to the regular Outside School Hours Parent Meeting and parent help is sought with a range of tasks as required. One of our parents has recently completed collating the first parent questionnaire which has been very positive.

I have been most impressed with the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Handbook and am firmly of the opinion that I would be very disappointed if our Early Childhood School, not just the Day Care, didn't adhere to the fifty two principles. As a result, it has become a routine matter to discuss these Principles at the weekly school staff meeting.

While we do have established written School Policies, based on the ACT Department of Education and Training's Policies, it has become necessary to ensure that the Day Care program is included in the Policy Statements.
The Day Care Philosophy is not a separate one but is part of our overall Early Childhood School philosophy. The Outside School Hours program is fully integrated

in the fullest sense of the word.

THE PROGRAM

When planning the Outside School Hours program we have ensured that we did so keeping in mind the very busy school program. For example, after a busy morning in the Pre School session our four year olds need a relaxed afternoon. So after lunch the whole school, pre school to year 2, enjoys a quiet time, reading, listening to taped stories or having a story read to them. Some of the pre schoolers go off to sleep. After rest time the Kindergarten to Year 2 children take part in our multi aged small group programs. The pre schoolers are given the option to join in if they would like to. Some choose to do so, others prefer to remain with the small pre school group. If not taking part in the multi aged groups, the pre schoolers are usually involved in a range of activities. They might choose to play outdoor games, water course, sandpit, cubby, blocks, trikes, scooters, woodwork, play dough, gardening etc. These are just some examples of what might be taking place after rest in the afternoon. The small group time is followed by a quiet story time prior to going home. For the children who remain for the late afternoon care, this will be followed by afternoon tea, a walk (often to the nearby park) and a craft activity and quiet games. The children are required to be collected by their families before 6pm.

On the days when the Pre School is not in session, Thursday and Friday,our Early Childhood Associate plans a relaxing day with a variety of activities. The pre school children like to visit the other classrooms from time to time to see what the older children are doing. Again, if there are multi aged groups taking place the pre schoolers are invited to join in. In the latter part of the year some have been taking part in our Aussie Sports program. This is a great small group program which includes folk and Middle Eastern dancing, movement to music, tot ball, skipping, kanga cricket, cooperative games, gymnastics, hop scotch, minkey hockey, stilts, obstacle course, to name just some of the choices being offered throughout the year. Craft also takes place on these days and is multi aged grouped for pre school, kindergarten, year 1 and year 2.

As the staff become more skilled at the multi age grouping techniques it is planned to extend it further into the school programs. I think it is because we have eased gently into this approach to grouping the children that we have a lot of parent support for it. The parent support is essential and some parents choose to come into school and assist with the small groups and this enables us to keep the groups as small as possible.

RESOURCES

Resources within our early childhood school have been carefully selected for this age range and can be shared by all the children. Having a clearly defined target group means that that the total funding is directed towards the same age range and a well resourced environment is the result. Playground needs are similar and ours has

recently been upgraded to Australian Standards and includes sand pits, water course, slides, swings, climbing frames, boat, guinea pig enclosure and summer house.

As already mentioned we overcame the biggest resource problem that we had with our commercial sponsorship package. The school staff never at any time envisaged having separate resources for the school and Outside School Hours programs. The school resources are fully shared with the Outside School Hours program. We do have separate craft trolleys [for obvious reasons!] but everything else is shared. When the P&C decided to purchase additional tricycles and scooters this year the Outside School Hours account purchased half of them. When supplies such as consumables are ordered the Outside School Hours program pays for a proportion of the goods ordered.

Of course the Outside School Hours program had some special requirements that required some additional 'one off ' expenditure this year. Some of this expenditire included new gates (to meet the licensing conditions), children's bedding, washing machine, dryer, an upgraded refrigerator and extra cupboard space.

CONCLUSION

Our parents are very pleased and our usual lengthy Waiting List for places in the school has increased , putting it into three figures. There is no doubt in my mind that this model for Early Childhood Education is one that parents want, children need and the staff enjoy working in. Effective, flexible and appropriate early childhood programs are more easily implemented within this type of environment.

Most discussions on schools these days inevitably turn to the effectiveness of Student Management programs. Our early childhood school does not include older children, some of whom, regretfully, may not be appropriate role models. Student management is not an issue and pastoral care is of the highest order. In the small and friendly environment the children's self confidence is obvious through their interaction with others and an emphasis on developing social skills, cooperation and negotiation. The older children consistently demonstrate a sense of responsibility, by caring for the younger children [the buddy system works well] and their environment - recycling, gardening, caring for pets etc.

Education systems can no longer continue to ignore the needs of their communities. Society has changed and as we move into the next century professional educators must be prepared to respond to the changing needs of families. We believe that our success is due to the fact that we offer a unique model for Early Childhood Education and the result of this just happens to allow for the development of strong Early Literacy and Numeracy skills.